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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 000355

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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: SUPPORTERS, DETRACTORS VIEW SPRINGBOK SYMBOL OF
SOUTH AFRICA DIFFERENTLY

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Summary

[11](#). (SBU) Few symbols in South Africa are as recognizable, or as controversial, as the Springbok logo worn by the 2007 World Cup champion South African rugby team. Worn by the rugby team since 1906, many saw the logo as a symbol of strength during the years the national team was banned from playing internationally in the latter part of the 20th century. Many today view the logo as a symbol of racism held over from the country's apartheid past, yet the Springbok remains the logo that the national team will wear in all competitions despite ongoing government efforts to retire it. The differing views of the Springbok logo and the ongoing battles over how the South African rugby team should evolve offer insight into what makes South Africa one of the most complex countries in the world. End Summary.

South Africa Boasts a Distinguished Rugby History

[12](#). (SBU) South Africa's rugby history begins in the late 1800s during the days of first Cape Colony Prime Minister Cecil Rhodes. South Africa played its first test matches in 1891 against the United Kingdom. In 1906, the first South African team to tour the United Kingdom and France adopted the Springbok logo -- a design featuring a springbok flying in mid-air. The name reportedly originated from a team meeting where first team captain Paul Roos proposed calling the team the Springboks so the British press could not create its own name for the South African side. The team from 1906 began the tradition of wearing the Springbok logo on the left breast pocket. (Note: The logo has changed at least six times since 1906, but has always featured a Springbok. End Note.) By the first World War, South Africa established itself -- along with New Zealand -- as one of the world's two great rugby powers. Following the second World War, Danie Craven was appointed coach and the team continued its run of excellence, dominating the competition throughout the 1950s into the 1960s.

[13](#). (SBU) The changing political dynamic in South Africa following the Sharpeville massacre and the decolonization of Africa, however, had a large impact on the national team during the 1960s. The South African rugby team had always been a whites-only organization even before the apartheid laws were implemented in 1948. Yet, the Springboks increasingly became the target of international controversy and protest. New Zealand toured South Africa in 1960 despite

a campaign based on the slogan of "No Maoris, No Tour" and a 150,000 signature petition opposing the team's travel because of the South African Government's laws. In 1967, the New Zealand team canceled its tour after the South African side refused to play against non-white players. The New Zealand side did tour South Africa in 1970 after the Afrikaner government agreed to treat Maori players and spectators as "honorary whites."

14. (SBU) Following the Soweto uprising in 1976, the Commonwealth implemented the Gleneagles Agreement. The agreement discouraged any sporting contact with South Africa, which prompted the apartheid government in 1977 to merge the segregated South African rugby unions. In 1981, Errol Tobias became the first non-white South African to represent his country after he took the field against Ireland. The rugby team continued playing through the 1980s, but the competition was not as fierce and the country's sporting isolation made it difficult for the team to secure matches. However, as apartheid's legal apparatus was abolished in the early 1990s, South Africa was re-admitted to international rugby and other sporting competitions. In 1995, South Africa was selected to host the rugby World Cup -- which it won -- in perhaps the country's greatest sporting moment. Some writers, including New York Times correspondent John Carlin in "Playing the Enemy," say no other event united the country following the 1994 election. President Nelson Mandela's congratulations to the team remain an iconic image today. (Note: A U.S. film company currently is making a movie about this victory with actor Morgan Freeman as Mandela and actor Matt Damon as the Springbok captain. End Note.) The team has repeated its success on the international stage, winning the 2007 World Cup in France, becoming one of only two teams to win the trophy twice.

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15. (SBU) Despite the South Africa rugby team's success, controversy over the Springbok logo has continued. Many pundits have accused the rugby program of failing to promote non-white players. In 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) instituted a policy of transformation in South African sport that aimed to transform the rugby team into a unit more representative of South Africa's ethnic backgrounds and classes. ANC parliamentarian Butana Komphela recently expressed his view that "sport cannot be excluded from imperatives of empowerment and transformation." Yet, the desired change has been slow. The 1995 World Cup championship team featured only one non-white player and the 2007 World Cup champion fielded only two non-white players. It was only after the Springboks won the 2007 World Cup that the rugby team appointed its first non-white coach and named 16 non-white players (of the 35 total chosen) as new Springbok players.

"We Must Protect This Legacy"

16. (C) South African Rugby Union Chief Executive Officer Johan Prinsloo and his legal staff met with Poloff in their offices in Cape Town on February 6. Prinsloo opened the meeting by showcasing the team's 2007 World Cup trophy and all the other trophies the team has garnered over the years. Prinsloo noted that the government has been trying for years to remove the Springbok from the national team's jerseys. He noted, "This is a marketing issue, not a racial one." According to the rugby union, the South African Government wants greater control over the Springbok because it raises so much money internationally. He relayed, "The government wants a stake in the Springbok, which is what the name change is all about. Right now, the Rugby Union controls all profits from the use of the Springbok. If the government gets its way on this ... all profits would go to the South African state." He said the government actually prefers that the

logo remain but that it wants to receive the funds from the merchandise. He believes the Springbok logo will remain because the government has backed off in recent months due to public backlash. He noted that he received 300,000 emails when the ANC made its most recent push to replace the Springbok with a Protea (the logo of the South African cricket and other international teams).

17. (C) Prinsloo admitted that the rugby team had a long way to go to "transform itself," but he added that much progress has been made. He pointed to the fact that the team now has a coloured coach and that half of the team is either black or coloured. He added that many of the youth leagues are now featuring non-white players and that coaches across the country are doing "everything they can to promote the game across racial and class lines." He said, "The problem is that as we transform, we must remain competitive. We must protect this legacy of rugby so that our children do not inherit a program that is weak and cannot beat the best." Prinsloo said that it is a tough balance to win and to transform especially when competition is tough worldwide. Not only has the rugby team included more non-white players on the current team, Prinsloo noted that the team has added nutrition and training programs for non-white players across the country. He said, "Part of the challenge we face is that the country. He said, "Part of the challenge we face is that black players often come from families that cannot provide more than one or two meals a day ... if we want to create a level playing field we must improve nutrition and training." The CEO showed Poloff many of the mobile training facilities that the rugby team uses in townships to attract young players. The facilities feature the latest gym equipment and come staffed with trainers and nutritionists.

18. (C) Prinsloo ended the meeting by thanking the US for its interest in the sport and for wanting to create opportunities for all South Africans. He reiterated that the rugby program has had racial problems, but promised that they are working "as hard as possible to meet the government's demands." He said, "We are doing the best we can. I think rugby is the most transformed sport in South Africa and we have the stats to back that up." He also added that something to look for in coming months is that the government will be mandating that rugby teams play their matches in the 2010 World Cup stadiums once the international soccer tournaments are finished next year. He noted, "We know the government does not want the new stadiums to become white elephants ... which

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means we will play there in the future."

"The Springbok Emblem Divides Us"

19. (SBU) Sports Portfolio Committee chair Butana Komphela's office has refused requests for meetings to discuss the Springbok logo over the years, but has made many public statements on the issue. He was a leader last year in setting up legislative sessions to discuss whether the Springbok should be removed. Komphela has long argued that the logo must go because the rugby union is run by "whites and Indians who do not understand transformation and (sic) lack vision." He asserts that the logo divides the country and has failed to "ever unify South Africans." Most recently, during parliamentary sessions to discuss the issue in October 2008, Komphela said, "Minister, I want you to observe the arrogance of white people on the Springbok emblem." He further noted that the Springboks failure to wear "Say No to Racism" on their jerseys last year was a sign of the rampant racist culture throughout South African rugby. He has claimed that former President Nelson Mandela never endorsed the use of the Springbok on the team's jerseys and that there "should be no negotiation over whether it should be removed."

¶10. (SBU) The ANC has seemingly backed away from Komphela's statements in recent months, but it remains unclear for how long. ANC spokesperson Jesse Duarte told reporters late last year that the ANC wanted to state "categorically that it would not like to see any replacement or change of the Springbok emblem until (there is) sufficient debate and consultation (between) all stakeholders, including rugby supporters." Some ANC officials have since noted that emblems are not matters of life and death and said they would prefer focusing on the preparations for the 2010 World Cup. Some pundits, including sports writers from the Afrikaans daily Beeld, say that the issue is far from over and that there will always be sentiments within the ruling party for the emblem to change. However, the logo for now has been adjusted to feature the Springbok in mid-air next to a Protea.

Comment

¶11. (C) The debate over the Springbok emblem is an example of the lingering difficulties of transformation. The rugby union makes compelling arguments about how far the team has come in recent years to represent all South Africans. The government makes some equally valid points about how the sport and the emblem often has symbolized some South Africans, at the expense of others. The national rugby team draws players from the provincial teams playing in a national league. These teams increasingly include star-quality players who are black and coloured. Black, coloured, and Indian fans are well represented in the stadiums, and follow the exploits of the Springbok national team. As the audience for world class rugby diversifies, the ruling party cannot help but be influenced by these changes. The differing views of the Springbok and the ongoing battles over how the South African rugby team should evolve offer insight into what makes South Africa one of the most complex countries in the world.

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